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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KATHMANDU 002207

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SUBJECT: TEMPORARY UNHCR HEAD IN KATHMANDU DISCUSSES
BHUTANESE REFUGEE SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL

REF: A. GENEVA 4707

[1](#)B. GENEVA 4652

Classified By: DCM Robert K. Boggs, Reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The new UNHCR Kathmandu Officer-in-Charge (OIC) traveled to Nepal,s Bhutanese refugee camps November 16 to follow-up on an investigation into reports that refugees on the staffs of UNHCR,s implementing partner NGOs had engaged in sexual exploitation. The new OIC arrived in-country November 13 to take over from the departing Representative, who was removed after he was slow to act on these reports. Geneva has tasked the OIC with devising an action plan to prevent the recurrence of such incidents and to help the victims. Nepal,s Foreign Ministry has pledged to cooperate in the identification and prosecution of the perpetrators. End Summary.

Just Landed, New OIC Leads Mission to Camps

[1](#)2. (C) The newly-arrived Officer-In-Charge for UNHCR Kathmandu, Abraham Abraham (Note: same first and last names), told the Ambassador November 15 that he would travel to southeastern Nepal November 16 to lead an inspection mission to follow-up on reports of sexual exploitation by staff at the Bhutanese refugee camps (Refrels). The mission would focus on measures and remedies, including protection systems, to prevent such problems from recurring, and would look at what could be done for those affected, Abraham said. Abraham arrived in Nepal on November 13 on temporary assignment after the previous UNHCR Representative, Michel Dupoizat, was called back to Geneva "for consultations." Abraham disclosed that Dupoizat probably will not return to his position in Kathmandu.

[1](#)3. (C) In addition to Abraham himself, the team includes two protection officers and a media specialist from UNHCR headquarters, as well as two Norwegian experts on sexual abuse. Upon completion of his inspection, Abraham will return to Geneva to brief his superiors.

Promises Action Plans, Refocus of Priorities

[1](#)4. (C) In sending Abraham to Nepal, Geneva charged him with devising both immediate and long-term plans of action to respond to the allegations. Abraham plans to review UNHCR Kathmandu,s entire 2003 program with an eye to reorienting it. From what he knows so far of UNHCR,s operations in Nepal, Abraham said, he has noticed a tendency for the protection and program teams &to go off on their own without sufficient cooperation.⁸ Thus the protection and programming functions would have to be better integrated, he judged. (Note: Abraham has visited Nepal twice before, and previously served as the head of UNHCR,s South Asia desk. End Note.)

[1](#)5. (C) Abraham made clear that his was not a fact-finding mission. A team had already been to the camps for that purpose, and their report was in preparation. He said he would await that report before making a judgment on the facts, but that as soon as the report is completed, the focus will be on identifying the victims. Eighteen have come forward to date. Abraham confirmed Refrels, reports that the perpetrators included teachers and staff of NGOs working as UNHCR,s implementing partners, but no one working for UNHCR directly.

Donors Briefed on Investigation

[1](#)6. (SBU) Abraham presided over a donors' meeting at UNHCR Kathmandu's offices November 19 at which he briefed on his plans for moving forward. The first priority will for the two temporary field officers in Jhapa to contact the victims to provide them with psychological, social, medical and security assistance. Second will be to see that immediate action is taken against the perpetrators. Abraham stated UNHCR's belief that these individuals should be fired, not employed elsewhere in the camps, and prosecuted. Third,

UNHCR will work with camp and local officials to ensure that these types of incidents do not recur. To this end, they plan to: highlight the problem, train NGOs to deal with it, link the issue to "all aspects of assistance," and encourage all partners to sign a Code of Conduct similar to that devised by UNHCR following a similar scandal in West Africa.

17. (SBU) Abraham told the assembled donors that UNHCR had delegated "far too much" responsibility to NGOs and to the refugees, and it was time for these responsibilities to be taken back. Moreover, the entire protection system would have to be reviewed. Abraham's remarks were strikingly candid, as when he said, "we thought NGOs knew how to deliver humanitarian aid, but perhaps we were mistaken."

Nepal Pledges Cooperation

18. (C) Abraham related to the Ambassador that he had met with Nepal's ForSec on November 15 and requested that the perpetrators be identified and brought to justice. The ForSec was aware of the investigation, and agreed to cooperate as far as possible.

UNHCR Taking Charges &Very Seriously8

19. (C) According to Abraham, the reports of sexual misbehavior by camp staff &came as a shock to all of us.8 The incidents in West Africa had put Geneva &on high alert,8 and they did not want to see them repeated. Headquarters had an &absolute focus8 to make sure this does not go any further and is &nipped in the bud.8 Thus they took the reports from Nepal very seriously and would likely discipline those involved as well as UNHCR officers who had overall responsibility for the program.

Previous Head Out of Step

10. (C) One local UNHCR staff member (strongly protect) told Conoff that Dupoizat,s initial reaction to reports of sexual abuse had been to rationalize that such incidents are inevitable in a refugee population that large. (Note: Over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees inhabit the seven camps. End Note.) The staffer said she had pointed out to Dupoizat that after the West Africa scandal, the High Commissioner had stated publicly that even one incident was too many. Given the social stigma, the staffer told Dupoizat that she believed the actual number of cases could be at least ten times larger than the number reported. The staffer clarified that Dupoizat had not objected when the Jhapa field office, in its monthly report to Geneva, had reported the allegations of sexual exploitation. Almost immediately, Geneva sent the inspection team described Ref B. There was no &whistle blower8 per se, the staffer added.

Comment

11. (C) UNHCR headquarters has responded quickly to investigate the very serious allegations made against staff in its camps. The problems at UNHCR,s office in Kathmandu are not unlike those faced by most large bureaucratic organizations: over-compartmentalization of information, a lack of communication and accountability, turf battles. Even so, for a dozen years the office managed what are widely regarded as model refugee camps to house the Bhutanese refugees. Dupoizat,s comments to his local staffer suggest that his removal came in large part because he was out of step with his High Commissioner--and with the times--and thus had acted slowly to address serious problems in the camps under his charge.

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